

Agreeing the Nature of the Problem

Introduction

1. It is the view of the SDLP, clearly stated in our initial submission to the Talks last May, that "before we seek solutions to the Northern Ireland problem we ensure that we understand what the nature of that problem is and, just as importantly, that to the greatest extent possible we understand each other's perception of what it is". We believe that it is essential, as we recommence our dialogue, that we remind ourselves of the central points of that analysis of the problem and that we seek, in so far as it is possible to do so, agreement on the nature of the problem. The greater the degree of agreement which can be reached on the fundamental nature of the problem, the greater we believe is the likelihood of agreement on the structures we shall seek to build to address that problem.

Conflict of

Identities

2. The SDLP believes that in its contemporary manifestation the Northern Ireland problem is in essence a conflict of two identities or, more precisely, the failure to devise political structures which accommodate the differences between, and allow full and mutual expression to, those two identities. Therefore, the first step towards ensuring that we do not fail at this attempt should be a full and open acknowledgement of those identities.

3. What follows is a brief, succinct reiteration of the essential characteristics of the nationalist and unionist identities as understood by the SDLP (and the three other parties which participated with us in the New Ireland Forum). ?

4. The **Nationalist community** in Northern Ireland sees its identity as essentially Irish and part of the wider Irish family on the island of Ireland. Its vision and aspiration are the creation of a new and tolerant society that unites and accommodates all traditions in a new Ireland, where Nationalists and Unionists can co-exist in harmony and mutual respect.

5. The **Unionist community**, on the other hand, perceives itself as British. The majority of Unionists are also Protestant and, as such, are strengthened in their allegiance to the British Crown by the latter's essential Protestantism. Unionists generally also regard themselves as being Irish, although this does not include a willingness to live under all-Ireland institutions. However, many of them identify with Ireland and with various features of Irish life and their culture and way of life embrace much that is common to people throughout Ireland.

6. These being the essential characteristics of nationalist and unionist identities, the new political structures which we are seeking to build must ensure parity of esteem for both.

A Common Declaration

7. The SDLP acknowledges that the inter-party talks of last year contributed significantly to deepening our understanding of each other's points of view and, in particular, of our respective identities. At this early point in our renewed dialogue we invite all participants to agree a clear statement of the nature of the problem we are addressing and a determination to build new structures to accommodate the identities which lie at the heart of that problem.